

## SATIRE 10

### *The Futility of Aspirations*

In all the countries that stretch from Cadiz across to the Ganges  
and the lands of dawn, how few are the people who manage to  
tell

genuine blessings from those of a very different order,  
dispelling the mists of error! For when do we have good  
grounds

for our fears or desires? What idea proves so inspired that you do  
not

regret your attempt to carry it out, and its realization?

The gods, in response to the prayers of the owners, obligingly  
wreck

entire households. In peace and in war alike, we beg  
for things that will hurt us. To many the art of speaking is fatal,  
and their own torrential fluency. In a famous instance, an athlete 10  
met his end through trusting in his strength and his marvellous  
muscles.

More, however, are smothered by heaps of money, amassed  
with excessive care, and by fortunes exceeding other men's  
wealth

by as much as the giant British whale outgrows the dolphin.  
Hence it was, in those terrible times, that on Nero's orders  
Longinus' house and the over-rich Seneca's spacious park  
were closed, and the Lateran family's splendid mansion  
besieged

by an entire company. A soldier rarely enters an attic.

When you make a journey by night, if you carry even a handful  
of plain silver items, you will go in fear of the sword  
and barge-pole; you will quake at the shadow of a reed that  
sways in the moonlight.

The traveller with nothing on him sings in the robber's face.

10

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As a rule, the first prayer offered, and the one that is most  
 familiar  
 in every temple, is 'money': 'let my wealth increase,' 'let my  
 strong box  
 be the biggest of all down town'. But aconite never is drunk  
 from an earthenware mug; *that* is something to fear when you're  
 handed  
 a jewelled cup, or when Setine glows in a golden wine-bowl.  
 In view of that, you may well approve of the two philosophers:  
 one of them used to laugh whenever he closed the door  
 and stepped into the street; his opposite number would weep. 30  
 While harsh censorious laughter is universal and easy,  
 one wonders how the other's eyes were supplied with moisture.  
 Demócritus' sides would shake with gales of incessant laughter,  
 although in the towns of his day there were no purple- or scarlet-  
 bordered togas to be seen; no rods or litters or platforms.  
 What *would* he have made of a praetor standing there in his car,  
 lifted high in the air amid the dust of the race-track,  
 dressed in the tunic of Jove himself, with a curtain-like toga  
 of Tyrian embroidery draped on his shoulders, and a crown so  
 enormous  
 in its circumference that no neck could support its weight; 40  
 in fact it is held by a public slave who sweats with exertion.  
 (He rides in the same chariot to restrain the official from hybris.)  
 And don't forget the bird that is perched on his ivory staff,  
 on this side trumpeters, on that a train of dutiful clients  
 walking in front, and the snow-white Romans beside his bridle  
 who have been transformed into friends by the dole thrust into  
 their purses.  
 In his day too, in all the places where people gathered,  
 he found material for laughter. He showed by his excellent sense  
 that men of the highest quality who will set the finest examples  
 may be born in a land with a thick climate, peopled by  
 boncheads. 50  
 He used to laugh at the masses' worries, and at their pleasures,  
 and sometimes, too, at their tears. For himself, when Fortune  
 threatened,  
 he would tell her go hang, and make a sign with his middle  
 finger.

So what in fact are the useless or dangerous things that are  
 sought,  
 for which one must duly cover the knees of the gods with wax?  
 Some are sent hurtling down by the virulent envy to which  
 their power exposes them. Their long and impressive list of  
 achievements  
 ruins them. Down come their statues, obeying the pull of the  
 rope.

Thereupon, axe-blows rain on the very wheels of their chariots,  
 smashing them up; and the legs of the innocent horses are  
 broken.

60

Now the flames are hissing; bellows and furnace are bringing  
 a glow to the head revered by the people. The mighty Sejanus  
 is crackling. Then, from the face regarded as number two  
 in the whole of the world, come pitchers, basins, saucepans, and  
 piss-pots.

Frame your door with laurels; drag a magnificent bull,  
 whitened with chalk, to the Capitol. They're dragging Sejanus  
 along

by a hook for all to see. Everyone's jubilant. 'Look,  
 what lips he had! What a face! You can take it from me that I  
 never

cared for the fellow. But what was the charge that brought him  
 down?

Who informed, who gave him away, what witnesses proved it?' 70  
 'Nothing like that. A large, long-winded letter arrived  
 from Capri.'

'Fine . . . I ask no more.'

But what's the reaction  
 of Remus' mob? It supports the winner, as always, and turns on  
 whoever is condemned. If Nortia had smiled on her Tuscan  
 favourite,

if the elderly prince had been caught off guard and sent to his  
 death,

that same public, at this very moment, would be hailing Sejanus  
 as Augustus. Long ago, the people cast off its worries,  
 when we stopped selling our votes. A body that used to confer  
 commands, legions, rods, and everything else, has now  
 narrowed its scope, and is eager and anxious for two things only: 80



bread and races.

'I hear that a lot are going to die.'

'No question about it. The kitchen is sure to be hot.'

'My friend

Bruttidius looked a bit pale when I met him beside Mars' altar. I've an awful feeling that the mortified Ajax may take revenge for being exposed to danger. So now, as he lies by the river, let's all run and kick the man who was Caesar's enemy.

But check that our slaves are watching; then no one can say we didn't,

and drag his terrified master to court with his head in a noose.'

Such were the whispers and the common gossip concerning Sejanus.

Do *you* want to be greeted each morning, as Sejanus was;  
to possess his wealth; to bestow on one a magistrate's chair,  
to appoint another to an army command; to be seen as the  
guardian

of Rome's chief, as he sits on the narrow Rock of the Roedeers  
with his herd of Chaldaeans? Of course you would like to have  
spears and cohorts,

the cream of the knights, and a barracks as part of your house.

Why *shouldn't* you  
want them? For even people with no desire to kill  
covet the power. But what is the good of prestige and prosperity  
if, for every joy, they bring an equal sorrow?

Would you sooner wear the bordered robe of the man that you  
see there

being dragged along, or be a power in Fidénæ or Gabii,  
adjudicating on weights and quantities, or a ragged aedile  
smashing undersize measuring cups in empty Ulúbrae?

You acknowledge, then, that Sejanus never succeeded in  
grasping

what one should really pray for. By craving ever more honours  
and seeking ever more wealth, he was building a lofty tower  
of numerous storeys; which meant that the fall would be all the  
greater,

and that when the structure gave way, its collapse would wreak  
devastation.

What cast down the likes of Pompey and Crassus, and him  
who tamed the people of Rome and brought them under the  
lash?

It was the pursuit of the highest place by every device,  
and grandiose prayers, which were duly heard by malevolent  
gods.

110

Few monarchs go down to Ceres' son-in-law free from  
bloody wounds; few tyrants avoid a sticky death.

Glorious eloquence, such as Demosthenes and Cicero had—  
*that* is desired from the start, and through Minerva's vacation,  
by the youngster who worships the thrifty goddess, as yet with a  
coin,

and who has a slave in attendance to mind his diminutive satchel.  
Yet eloquence proved the undoing of both those statesmen; and  
both

were carried to ruin by the large and copious flood of their genius.

Thanks to his genius, one had his hands and head cut off.

120

(The rostrum was never stained with a petty advocate's blood.)

'O fortunate state of Rome, which dates from my consulate!'

He could have scorned Mark Antony's swords, had all his  
sayings

been like that. So—better to write ridiculous poems  
than that inspired Philippic (the second one in the set)  
which is universally praised. An equally cruel death  
removed the man whose fluent power excited the wonder  
of Athens, as he used his reins to drive the crowded assembly.  
The gods in heaven frowned on his birth, and fate was against  
him.

His father, with eyes inflamed by the soot of the glowing metal,  
sent him away from the coal and tongs, and the anvil that  
fashions

130

swords, and all the filth of Vulcan, to a rhetoric tutor.

The spoils of war—a breastplate nailed to the trunk of a tree  
shorn of its branches, a cheekpiece dangling from a shattered  
helmet,

a chariot's yoke with its pole snapped off, a pennant ripped  
from a crippled warship, a dejected prisoner on top of an arch—

these, it is thought, represent superhuman blessings, and these are the things that stir a general, be he Greek, Roman, or foreign,

to excitement; they provide a justification for all his toil and peril. So much stronger is the thirst for glory than for goodness. (Who, in fact, embraces Goodness herself, if you take away the rewards?) Often states have been ruined by a few men's greed for fame, by their passion for praise and for titles

inscribed in the stones protecting their ashes—stones which the boorish

strength of the barren fig-tree succeeds in splitting apart; for even funeral monuments have their allotted life-span.

Weigh Hannibal; how many pounds will you find in that mighty

commander? This is the man too big for Africa—a land which is pounded by the Moorish sea and extends to the steaming Nile,

then south to Ethiopia's tribes and their different elephants. 150

He annexes Spain to his empire, and dances lightly across the Pyrenees; then nature bars his path with the snowy Alps; by vinegar's aid he splits the rocks and shatters the mountains. Italy now is within his grasp; but he still presses on.

'Nought is achieved,' he cries, 'until I have smashed the gates with my Punic troops, and raised our flag in the central Subura!' Lord, what a sight! It would surely have made an amazing picture:

the one-eyed general riding on his huge Gaetulian beast.

So how does the story end? Alas for glory! Our hero is beaten. He scrambles away into exile, and there he sits in the hall of the monarch's palace, a great and conspicuous client, 160

until it shall please his Bithynian lord to greet the day.

That soul which once convulsed the world will meet its end, not from a sword, or stones, or spears, but from an object which, avenging Cannae, will take reprisal for all that bloodshed—

a ring. Go on, you maniac; charge through the Alpine wastes to entertain a class of boys and become an oration!



A single world is not enough for the youth of Pella.  
 He frets and chafes at the narrow limits set by the globe,  
 as though confined on Gýara's rocks or tiny Seríphos. 170  
 Yet, when he enters the city that was made secure by its potters,  
 he will rest content with a coffin. It is only death which reveals  
 the puny size of human bodies. People believe  
 that ships once sailed over Athos, and all the lies that Greece  
 has the nerve to tell in her histories: that the sea was covered with  
 boats,  
 and the ocean provided a solid surface for wheels. We believe  
 deep rivers failed, that streams were all drunk dry by the  
 Persians  
 at lunch, and whatever Sostratus sings with his soaking pinions.  
 Yet in what state did the king return on leaving Salamis—  
 the one who would vent his savage rage on Corus and Eurus 180  
 with whips, an outrage never endured in Aeolus' cave,  
 the one who bound the earth-shaking god himself with fetters  
 (that, indeed, was somewhat mild; why he even considered  
 he deserved a branding! What god would be slave to a man like  
 that?)—  
 yet in what state did he return? In a solitary warship, slowly  
 pushing its way through the bloody waves which were thick  
 with corpses.  
 Such is the price so often claimed by our coveted glory.

'Jupiter, grant me a lengthy life and many a year!'

Whether you are hale or wan, that is your only prayer.

Yet think of the endless and bitter afflictions that always attend 190  
 a long old age. First and foremost, look at the face—  
 misshapen and hideous beyond recognition; instead of skin,  
 you see a misshapen hide, baggy cheeks, and the kind  
 of wrinkles that are etched on the aged jowls of an African ape,  
 where Thábraca stretches its shady forests along the coast.  
 Young men vary in numerous ways—A is more handsome  
 than B and has different features; C is more sturdy than D.  
 Old men are all alike—trembling in body and voice,  
 with a pate that is now quite smooth, and the running nose of an  
 infant.

The poor old fellow must mumble his bread with toothless gums.

200

He is so repellent to all (wife, children, and himself),  
that he even turns the stomach of Cossus the legacy-hunter.  
He loses his former zest for food and wine as his palate  
grows numb. He has long forgotten what sex was like; if one  
tries  
to remind him, his shrunken tool, with its vein enlarged, just lies  
there,

and, though caressed all night, it will continue to lie there.  
As for the future, what can those white-haired ailing organs  
hope for? Moreover, the lust that, in spite of impotence,  
struggles

to gain satisfaction, is rightly suspect. And now consider  
the loss of another faculty. What joy does he get from a singer, 210  
however outstanding, or from the harpist Seleucus and others  
who as harpists or pipers always shine in golden mantles?

What does it matter where he sits in the spacious theatre,  
when he can barely hear the sound of the horns or the fanfare  
of trumpets? The slave announcing a caller's arrival or telling  
the time is obliged to shout in his ear to make himself heard.

Again, so little blood remains in his chilly veins  
that he's only warm when he has a fever. All kinds of ailments  
band together and dance around him. If you asked their names  
I could sooner tell you how many lovers Oppia has taken, 220  
how many patients Thémison has killed in a single autumn,  
how many partners have been swindled by Basilus, how many  
minors

by Hirrus, how many men are drained in a single day  
by the tall Maura, how many schoolboys are debauched by  
Hamillus.

I could sooner count the country houses now possessed  
by the fellow who made my stiff young beard crunch with his  
clippers.

Here it's a shoulder crippled, there a pelvis or hip;  
*this* man has lost both eyes, and envies the fellow with one;  
*that* takes food with bloodless lips from another's fingers.  
He used to bare his teeth in greed at the sight of a dinner; 230  
now he merely gapes like a swallow's chick when its mother



alights with a beakful, going without herself. And yet,  
worse than any physical loss is the mental decay  
which cannot remember servants' names, nor the face of the  
friend

with whom he dined the previous evening, nor even the  
children,

his very own, whom he raised himself. By a cruel will  
he forbids his flesh and blood to inherit, and all his possessions  
go to Phialē. So potent the breath of that artful mouth  
which stood on sale for many years in the cell of a brothel.

Suppose his mind retains its vigour, he still must walk 240  
in front of his children's coffins, and bear to gaze on the pyre  
of his beloved wife or brother and on urns full of his sisters.  
This is the price of longevity. As people age, the disasters  
within their homes for ever recur; grief follows grief;  
their sorrows never cease, and their dress is the black of  
mourning.

The king of Pylos, if you place any trust in mighty Homer,  
stood for a life which was second only to that of a crow.

No doubt he was happy. Postponing death for three  
generations,

he began to count his years upon his right hand's fingers;  
he drank new wine at many a harvest. But listen a little, 250

I urge you, to the bitter complaints which he makes at the laws  
of fate

and his own protracted thread, as he watches the beard of the  
valiant

Antílochos blazing, and appeals to all his friends who are there  
to tell him why *he* should have survived to the present age,  
and what crime he has committed to deserve so long a life.

Peleus did the same as he mourned the death of Achilles;  
and so did the other, who rightly lamented the Ithacan  
swimmer.

Troy would still have been standing when Priam went down to  
join

the shades of Assaracus—Cassandra and Polyxena, tearing their  
garments,

would have led the ritual cries of lament, while Hector, along  
with 260

his many brothers, would have shouldered the body and carried  
it out

with magnificent pomp amid the tears of Ilium's daughters—  
had Priam died at an earlier time, a time when Paris  
had not as yet begun to build his intrepid fleet.

Therefore what boon did his great age bring him? He lived to see  
everything wrecked, and Asia sinking in flame and steel.

Then, removing his crown, he took arms, a doddering soldier,  
and slumped by the altar of highest Jove like a worn-out ox,  
which is scorned by the ungrateful plough after all its years of  
service

and offers its scraggy pathetic neck to its master's blade.

270

His was at least the end of a human being; the wife  
who survived him became a vicious bitch, snarling and barking.

I hasten on to our countrymen, passing over the king  
of Pontus, and Croesus too, whom the righteous Solon  
exhorted

in eloquent words to watch the close of a long-run life.

Exile, prison walls, the dreary swamps of Minturnae,  
begging for bread in the ruins of Carthage—it all resulted  
from living too long. What could nature, what could Rome  
have brought forth upon earth more blest than that famous  
man,

if, after leading around the city his host of captives  
and all the parade of war, he had breathed his last at the moment  
of greatest glory, when poised to leave his Teutonic car?

280

With kindly foresight, Campania gave a desirable fever  
to Pompey; however, the public prayers of numerous cities  
prevailed; so Pompey's fortune and that of the capital saved  
his life—but only to cut it off in defeat. Such mangling  
Lentulus missed; Cethéguis avoided that fate and was killed  
without mutilation; Catiline lay with his corpse entire.

When she passes Venus' temple, the anxious mother requests  
beauty—in a quiet voice for her sons, more loudly for her  
daughters,

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going to fanciful lengths in her prayers. 'So I do,' she says,  
'what's wrong with that? Latona delights in Diana's beauty.'



But Lucretia discourages people from praying for looks of the kind

which she had herself. Verginia would welcome Rutila's hump and bestow her own appearance on *her*. It's the same with a son; if he possesses physical charm, his parents are always in a state of wretched anxiety. For it's true that beauty and virtue are rarely found together. Although he may come from a home which instils pure habits and is just as strict as the Sabines of old, although generous Nature may add with a kindly hand the gift of an innocent heart and a face that burns with modest blushes (what greater boon can a boy receive from Nature, who has more authority than any caring parent or guardian?), he is not allowed to become a man. A wealthy seducer with brazen effrontery actually dares to approach the parents. Such is the confidence placed in bribes. No *ugly* youngster was ever castrated by a despot within his barbarous castle. Nero would never rape a stripling with bandy legs or scrofula, or one with a swollen belly and a crooked back. I challenge you now to rejoice in your son's good looks! And

300

greater hazards still are ahead. He'll become a lover at large; then he will have to fear whatever reprisals a furious husband may take. (He can hardly hope to have better luck than the ill-starred Mars; he too will be caught in the net.)

310

Moreover, such anger sometimes exacts more than is granted to anger by any law. Thus one is cut down by a dagger; another is cut up by a bloody whip; some make room for a mullet. Your young Endymion will fall for a married lady and become her lover. And then, once he has taken Servilia's cash, he will do it to one for whom he cares nothing, stripping her body of all its jewellery. For what will any woman deny to her clammy crotch? She may be an Oppia or a Catulla, but when she's rotten, *that* is the centre of all her conduct. 'What harm is beauty to one who is pure?' Ask rather what profit was gained by Hippolytus, or by Bellerophon, from his stern convictions.

320

⟨Phaedra and Sthenoboea⟩



She blushed with shame at the rebuff, as though despised for her looks;  
 Sthenoboea, too, was just as incensed as the woman of Crete.  
 They lashed themselves, both, to fury; a woman is at her most savage  
 when goaded to hatred by an injured pride.

Decide what advice

you think should be offered to the man whom Caesar's wife is  
 determined 330  
 to marry. He's a fine fellow of excellent birth, and extremely  
 handsome; but the luckless wretch is being swept to his death  
 by Messalina's eyes. She has long been sitting there, all prepared  
 in her flaming veil; a purple bed stands open to view  
 in the grounds. A dowry of a million will be paid in the old  
 ancestral  
 manner; a priest will come with people to witness the contract.  
 Perhaps you thought all this was a secret known to a few?  
 Not at all; she insists on a proper ceremony. State your decision.  
 Unless you're willing to obey her commands, you must die  
 before dusk.

If you go through with the crime, there will be a respite until 340  
 what is known to all and sundry reaches the emperor's ear.  
 He'll be the last to hear of his family's shame; in the meantime  
 do what you're told, if you rate a few days' extra life  
 as highly as that. Whatever you judge to be the more easy  
 and better course, that fine white neck must bow to the sword.

Is there nothing, then, that people should pray for? If you want  
 some advice,  
 you will let the heavenly powers themselves determine what  
 blessings  
 are most appropriate to us and best suit our condition;  
 for instead of what's pleasant, the gods will always provide  
 what's fitting.

They care more for man than he cares for himself; for we 350  
 are driven by the force of emotion, a blind overmastering  
 impulse,

when we yearn for marriage and a wife who will give us  
children; the gods,  
however, foresee what the wife and children are going to be like.  
Still, that you may have something to ask for—some reason to  
offer

the holy sausages and innards of a little white pig in a chapel—  
you ought to pray for a healthy mind in a healthy body.

Ask for a valiant heart which has banished the fear of death,  
which looks upon length of days as one of the least of nature's  
gifts; which is able to suffer every kind of hardship,  
is proof against anger, craves for nothing, and reckons the trials 360  
and gruelling labours of Hercules as more desirable blessings  
than the amorous ease and the banquets and cushions of  
Sardanapállus.

The things that I recommend you can grant to yourself; it is  
certain

that the tranquil life can only be reached by the path of goodness.  
Lady Luck, if the truth were known, you possess no power;  
it is we who make you a goddess and give you a place in heaven.